DAWN

OPINION

Capital terrorism

AFTER a long pause, terrorism has returned to the federal capital, with at least 12 people losing their lives in Tuesday's suicide bombing outside the district court building in Islamabad. While the so-called peripheries — KP and Balochistan — had long been experiencing a deadly wave of militant violence, yesterday terrorists struck what is supposed to be one of the most secure cities in this country. And while in the ongoing wave of terrorism mostly security personnel and law enforcers have been targeted, in the latest tragedy a clearly civilian target was hit. The Islamabad bombing brings back painful memories of the last wave of militant violence that took a heavy toll of both security men and civilians before the monster of terrorism was neutralised. Tuesday also saw a clearance operation underway at the Cadet College Wana, another soft target, which had been stormed by militants on Monday.

Speaking of both the Islamabad and Wana attacks, the prime minister said they bore the hallmarks of "Indian state terrorism in the region", while linking Afghanistan to the incidents. Shehbaz Sharif further mentioned that '*khawarij*' linked to the banned TTP and Baloch separatists were involved. Meanwhile, the defence minister sounded an ominous warning, saying that "we are in a state of war". It is obvious that a full investigation is required to uncover the forces behind both acts of terrorism, and to bring the perpetrators of these heinous crimes to justice. And if any evidence is found of the involvement of India and the Afghan Taliban in these attacks, the issue must be taken up immediately with both New Delhi and Kabul.

But while possible foreign links to acts of terrorism must be probed, and those involved beyond our borders confronted, the state's primary duty right now is to shore up the home front, and re-examine its counterterrorism strategy in the wake of the resurgence of militancy. For long, Pakistan's major cities have been immune to mass-level terrorist attacks. The fact that a suicide bomber was able to strike in Islamabad indicates a major security lapse. Moreover, if we are indeed in a war-like situation, as the defence minister has claimed, then dealing with this crisis requires a national response. All stakeholders — the opposition, security experts, civil society — need to be taken on board to formulate a cohesive response to the threat of terrorist violence. Petty politicking and targeting of the opposition and all critical voices must stop. All shades of opinion must be heard so that Pakistan can emerge from this crisis stronger and defeat terrorism and extremism. The current strategy is not working, and has resulted in a high number of losses of men in uniform as well as civilians. Statesmanship and democratic buy-in are required to emerge victorious from this dark moment.

Summit of delivery

WITH world leaders gathered in Bel m for COP30, the Amazon rainforest provides an apt backdrop for a conference that demands less rhetoric and more action. Hosted by Brazil, this year's UN climate summit comes amid record heat, devastating floods and growing impatience over the world's slow response to the climate crisis. For vulnerable nations like Pakistan, the stakes could not be higher. Pakistan's delegation arrives with a mixed record — praised for strong climate diplomacy but criticised for weak follow-through at home. Since the 2022 floods, which displaced millions and caused losses exceeding $30bn, Islamabad has been among the loudest voices calling for climate justice and fair financing for loss and damage. Yet progress has been slow. The newly operationalised Loss and Damage Fund, though a welcome step, still holds less than $1bn globally — far short of what vulnerable countries require, and with disbursement mechanisms yet to take shape. The challenge for Pakistan is not only to secure a fair share of this support but also to show it can channel such funds transparently and effectively into adaptation and resilience projects on the ground.

At COP30, the conversation has shifted decisively towards implementation. Countries are being urged to move beyond pledges to tangible delivery on emission cuts, renewable energy transitions and adaptation measures. Pakistan, responsible for less than 1pc of global greenhouse gas emissions, still faces mounting domestic pressures to reform its energy mix. Though solar and hydropower projects are expanding, dependence on imported fossil fuels continues to strain the economy and the environment. Building on its updated Nationally Determined Contributions and ongoing National Adaptation Plan, Islamabad is expected to present progress on renewable targets and seek partnerships for green investment and climate-smart agriculture. Pakistan has also inaugurated its own pavilion at COP30 — themed 'From the Indus to the Amazon' — to showcase its resilience efforts and promote dialogue on equitable climate finance. Punjab's chief minister has highlighted initiatives such as the Suthra Punjab drive, e-mobility projects and reforestation, underlining provincial leadership in climate action. As the world's attention turns to the Amazon, Pakistan must ensure its climate narrative is not lost in the noise. Beyond appeals for aid, it must press for a fairer global financing framework while committing to domestic reforms that curb waste, pollution and deforestation.

Mr Sharaa in DC

IT is quite a turnaround. Once labelled a specially designated global terrorist by the US, with a $10m bounty on his head, interim Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa — earlier known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani — just had his first audience with Donald Trump in the White House. Both men had met earlier in Saudi Arabia, but this was Mr Sharaa's first visit to the US capital in his official capacity. Once the head of Al Qaeda in Syria, Mr Sharaa traded in his jihadi fatigues and turban for sharply tailored suits after overrunning Damascus with his forces in December 2024. Of course, the recognition by the Arab world and the Western bloc is 'payback' for Mr Sharaa's key role in wrapping up the Bashar al-Assad dictatorship. This shows that in the murky world of geopolitics, even those once seen as bloodthirsty militants can be rebranded as statesmen and liberators if they offer great powers the right services. In Ahmed al-Sharaa's case, these services entailed getting rid of the pro-Russia and pro-Iran Assad regime, and installing a dispensation more amenable to the Western bloc and its regional allies. Following the Trump meeting, the reintegration of Syria in the international system should pick up speed.

However, despite the spin, Syria has not turned into a model democracy. In fact, many of Mr Sharaa's comrades-in-arms have been accused of carrying out sectarian massacres of the Alawi and Druze communities. Moreover, while the jihadists were keen to see the back of Mr Assad, they appear uninterested in ending the Israeli occupation of Syria. In fact, Israeli meddling in Syria is considerable, with Tel Aviv promoting the idea of a fractured Syrian state, divided into ethnic and confessional 'cantons'. Along with rehabilitating ties with powerful states, Mr Sharaa also needs to protect minority communities, while liberating Syrian territory from Zionist occupation.

BY ZAHID HUSSAIN

Killing the Constitution

Legislators' talk of democracy rings hollow after they killed the spirit of the Constitution.

"The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command" — 1984 by George Orwell

PAKISTAN has witnessed military dictators abrogating or suspending the Constitution several times in the past. In fact, Gen Ziaul Haq has been quoted as saying that the Constitution was nothing more than a piece of paper which he could tear up at any time. The late dictator's remarks were a reflection of the arrogance that comes with power and of a dismissive attitude towards a Constitution that had been adopted unanimously by an elected parliament in 1973. The Constitution was restored with some amendments after the death of Gen Zia in an air crash in 1988.

Gen Pervez Musharraf suspended the 1973 Constitution not once but twice — in 1999 and then again in 2007 though his move did not get legal cover the second time round. He survived in power for some months after his second action. The Constitution was subsequently restored. But even those military rulers did not mutilate the Constitution the way it has been done now by a parliament which has a questionable public mandate.

While the 26th Amendment had shaken the very foundation of the trichotomy of power, the 27th has virtually murdered the Constitution. The last rites were being performed in haste under the watch of 'Big Brother'. It is perhaps, the darkest moment in our unenviable constitutional history.

It has been more of a puppet show — one after another, the lawmakers rose to defend the amendments that they are likely not to have been consulted on. Other members just shouted 'aye' when the vote was called perhaps without even reading the draft of the law provided to them at the session. They just had to follow the party line.

Some of them are familiar faces who in the past had also voted for changes in the Constitution in Zia and Musharraf's military governments. The required number of votes for the passage of the amendment in the Senate was duly produced by engineering a few defections from the opposition benches. One does not need to be reminded of how it happened. An opposition mutilated and further battered by the latest disqualification of several of its lawmakers were convicted in dubious trials by antiterrorism courts did not have much choice but to boycott the vote in parliament. The sham went on with no opposition in the House.

It has not been just the complete demolition of whatever independence of judiciary was left after the 26th Amendment but also the surrender of even the semblance of civilian rule. The new amendment will provide constitutional cover to the country's march towards becoming a praetorian state. The army chief has been granted unprecedented powers. Elevated to the rank of field marshal for his leadership in the four-day conflict with India in May this year, he will now have immunity from the law for his actions, with his term in office extended to five years and provision of another extension in service.

The lifetime immunity has not only been granted to five-star-ranked armed forces officers but also to the president. It is unprecedented in a democratic country not to hold leaders and state officials to account for their actions. This is not only a negation of democratic norms but also of the rule of law. In most democratic countries, such immunity is not granted to elected leaders even when in office. But after the 27th amendment, they will have complete immunity from illegal actions.

It was quite amusing to watch the debate on the amendment in the National Assembly when ministers and other members of the treasury benches made it a point to start their speeches by profusely praising Zulfikar Ali Bhutto for giving the country the 1973 Constitution and then, in the same breath, claimed that the amendment would further strengthen democracy in the country.

One can only marvel at the hypocrisy of these politicians for talking about democracy and the rule of law after killing the very spirit of the Constitution. But should one expect anything else from those who appear as mere puppets? After all, their very presence in the House is owed to certain quarters. A day before the amendment was tabled in the Senate I asked a very senior PML-N leader who had held many important ministerial positions in the past about the proposal. He actually had no idea about its provisions.

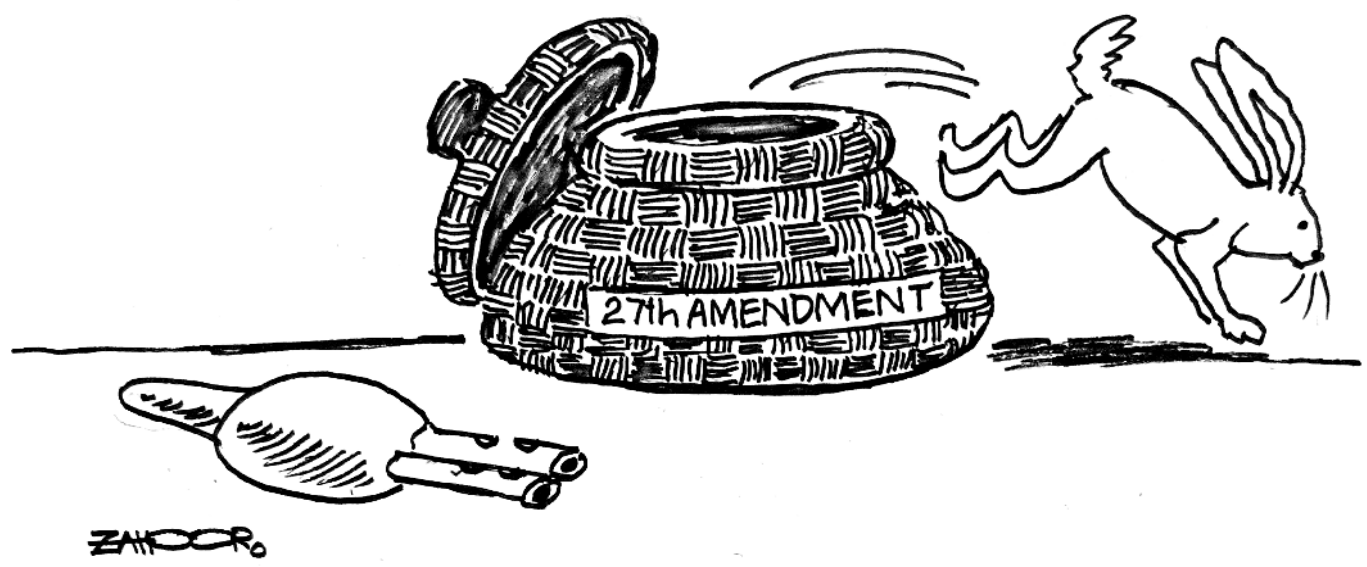
He was certainly not the exception. Even some federal ministers privately admitted they had not been kept in the loop. It is not surprising given the secrecy surrounding the substance of the amendment. And the way it is being rushed through parliament leaves nothing to the imagination. That is the state of our so-called democracy under a dispensation installed through manipulated elections.

It is perhaps the role of the PPP, which while a part of the coalition has opted to stay out of government, that has been the most appalling in the entire episode. The party and its leaders were also instrumental in the demolition of the Constitution that the PPP takes credit for instituting. It sounded so surreal when PPP lawmakers eloquently described the sacrifices given by the party leadership for democracy to uphold the sanctity of the Constitution.

There is indeed no denial about the PPP's struggle for democracy in the past. But the current leadership has betrayed that legacy. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has justified the changes in the Constitution particularly the establishment of a separate constitutional court saying it was a part of the Charter of Democracy signed by the PPP and PML-N in 2006. But his argument about the court is completely out of context. Moreover, there is much more in the charter related to the establishment of civilian supremacy and the Constitution. The 27th amendment totally negates the charter and will lead to authoritarianism. History will judge the current leadership in a completely different way from the past leadership.

A big question is whether the Supreme Court will now act to protect the Constitution and whatever little autonomy the judiciary has been left with after it accepted the 26th Amendment. Sadly, the amendment has also weakened the unity of the federation. ■

The writer is an author and journalist.
zhussain100@yahoo.com
X: @hidhussain



BY NADEEM-UL-HAQUE

The poverty measurement industry

EVERY few years, Pakistan's poverty line moves, and the poor multiply or vanish accordingly. Sometimes 22 per cent of Pakistanis are poor, sometimes 39pc, sometimes 44pc. Each new estimate arrives with a World Bank press release or a government statement claiming progress or crisis. Yet few ask why the numbers differ, what they really mean, or whether the differences are even statistically meaningful. Poverty has become a ritual, not a revelation, a statistical performance that signals concern without demanding reform.

Pakistan currently lives under multiple definitions of poverty. The national 'cost of basic needs' line places about 21.9pc of the population below the poverty threshold, based on 2018-2019 survey data. The World Bank, using 2021 purchasing power parities, offers its own global poverty lines, $3.00, $4.20, and $8.30 per day, designed for international comparison.

On the $4.20 line, roughly 44pc to 45pc of Pakistanis qualify as poor. Under the older 2017 PPP series, the figure was around 39pc. Then there is the multidimensional poverty index, or MPI, which measures deprivation across health, education, and living standards: according to the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, about 38pc of Pakistanis are multidimensionally poor, while another 13pc are on the edge. The World Bank's nowcasts add another layer of confusion, projecting, not measuring, poverty at 25.3pc for 2023-24 through simulation rather than survey.

These numbers differ not because poverty changed overnight but because the yardsticks did. The problem is not that we have too little data, it is that we have too much of the wrong kind, deployed without clarity or context.

Then some talk of 'deprivation'. It is not simply low income but the denial of essentials, which include clean water, electricity, housing, education, nutrition, security, voice, and dignity. It is no longer about how much people earn, instead, it is about whether they can live with choice and dignity.

We are now trapped in a world where counting poverty has replaced combating it. Every new dataset becomes an opportunity for institutional signalling. Governments trumpet falling poverty as a proof of success; oppositions invoke rising poverty as the evidence of failure. Donors use new headcounts to justify fresh loans or social-protection projects. International agencies build entire careers around 'poverty diagnostics'. None of this tells us how to generate jobs, reform education, or modernise cities — the things that actually lift people out of poverty.

There is also a statistical sleight of hand. Poverty figures are rarely reported with confidence intervals. In surveys such as the *Household Integrated Economic Survey*, the sampling error is typically plus/minus two to four percentage points. A change from 22pc to 24pc may not be statistically distinguishable, yet it is presented as gospel truth.

> We are now trapped in a world where counting poverty has replaced combating it.

Worse, modelled projections, like the World Bank's nowcasts, are treated as hard data when they are, in fact, simulations based on inflation and consumption trends. Without confidence intervals, without transparency on method, these numbers are little more than educated guesses dressed in mathematical clothing.

Meanwhile, the poverty-measurement complex has become an economy in itself. Economists recalibrate PPPs and issue new global benchmarks. Consultants write reports and regressions. Governments set numerical 'targets' aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. International agencies publish 'poverty assessments' that do not alter policy. Everyone stays busy counting the poor, while few take responsibility for why they remain poor.

Only in limited contexts does measurement serve real policy purpose. The Benazir Income Support Programme is one such case, where data determines who receives cash transfers. But they hardly ever graduate from poverty. Poverty measurement has been harnessed to administer relief, not to trigger reform. The state uses data to stabilise poverty, not to end it. The poor are categorised, catalogued, and queued, but rarely are they liberated.

What do we actually learn from all these numbers? Absolute lines tell us who cannot afford essentials. Relative lines tell us who is left behind. Multidimensional indices tell us what they lack. But without integrating these insights, publishing margins of error, and linking measurement to action, they remain statistical d cor. They are more about moral satisfaction than material change.

If poverty measurement is to serve any real purpose, we need clarity, confidence, and consistency. Every estimate should specify which line, which PPP vintage, and whether it is survey-based or modelled. Every headcount should include its confidence interval. The national poverty line should remain stable, updated only for inflation.

Most important of all, we need to focus on social mobility to unlock the hurdles to people bettering their lot. Poor don't need state patronage; they need the opportunity to progress. Until then, poverty measurement will remain what it has become: a convenient currency for donors, politicians, and consultants, a moral fig leaf for systems that perpetuate dependence. We have multiple poverty lines but few escape routes. We debate decimals, not dignity. The real poverty in Pakistan today is not of income or data. It is a poverty of imagination, of courage, and of reform. ■

The writer is former VC of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics and deputy chair of the Planning Commission. He is currently director at the think tank Socioeconomic Insights and Analytics.

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777 (Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777